

## Written Copy: Matthew 21:37-44 “Giving Over Worthy Fruits”

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2 Pentecost: Proper 22

Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### Text: Matthew 21:37-44

<sup>37</sup> Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' <sup>38</sup> But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. <sup>39</sup> And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. <sup>40</sup> When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" <sup>41</sup> They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" <sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. <sup>44</sup> And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

### The text's intent

Convict the religious leaders that the vineyard they have taken control of their spiritual and physical life lived out on earth doesn't belong to them, it belongs to God. The fruit that they keep for themselves by calling the people to worship and follow them in work's righteousness is stealing the fruit of true worship, praise, and service that God expects them to lead the people in giving. Jesus is the Son of the vineyard owner who has come in person to call them to give over the fruit of repentant faith, yet they will do to Him as they and their ancestors have done to God's prophetic voices, kill Him. So because of their refusal to believe in the Son and His testimony, they will be cast out of the vineyard, God's reign and rule now and into eternity, and suffer the eternal destruction they have earned for themselves. God will build for Himself the Church, His presence on earth where His reign and rule will be established and emanate from with Jesus Christ as His selected cornerstone. All who belong will be built upon the faith that says Jesus is Lord and Savior, God in human form, come to save mankind from eternal destruction. All who deny Him will be broken and swept away like chaff. But all who confess Him with humble and repentant hearts will bear the fruit He desires now and will enjoy eternal life in His Paradise Vineyard to come.

### Focus Statement:

Jesus Christ is the Son who has come into the Vineyard of this world to call us back to repentant faith that holds Him to be the cornerstone of His temple presence here on earth, His Church, the One by which we are made good enough, righteous enough, through His death and resurrection, to live in His Vineyard, His Church, His presence on earth now and unto eternal life. His Spirit continues to come and speak into our hearts to keep us in repentant faith by which we produce fruits of faith-filled worship, praise and Service.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

While we are not the tenant farmers (religious leaders) of Jesus day, we are those who at times refuse to give to the Vineyard Owner (Heavenly Father) fruits of worship, praise, and service that are worthy of Him. We see what we've been given into our hands as for strictly our own benefit without thought of Him or others.

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

Holding Christ as the cornerstone of our faith, and seeing His death and resurrection as means by which we are right with God, we begin to produce worthy fruits of worship, praise, and loving service, made worthy by Christ's perfect work given to us by faith.

### Subject Sentence: Built on the Cornerstone We Produce Worthy Fruit.

## **Introduction:**

Has anyone ever owed you money, yet was unwilling to pay you back? Or have you ever loaned out something to someone else, one of your tools, an appliance, maybe a car, or even a house, and only those you loaned it to have been slow to or even refused to give it back, let alone thank you for allowing them to borrow it? Did you ever just decide to write it off, stop bugging them to return the money or the thing borrowed, and just let them have it as more or less a gift? Even though that is a nice gesture, you probably struggled doing that, just letting them have it, since after all it was rightfully yours, and you let them borrow it with the expectation of getting back. After all, you worked hard for it, and have need of it yourself. But it's just not worth the hassle of continuing to badger and bug a person who, for the most part, thinks it's their property now, something they were owed anyway, or for whatever dysfunctional reason in their head, they think they have a right to.

## **The Parable of the Tenants Who Owe Vineyard Owner Fruit**

Jesus tells us a Parable about tenant farmers who owe master of the house, the Vineyard Owner, but are refusing to give him back what he is due. In this respect it's a simple enough plot line. But remember, Jesus' parables are about situations in everyday life that have head scratching moments, things that would not have made sense to the people hearing it. And if we look closer, they don't make sense to us either. It's in these head scratching moments that Jesus is communicating important truths to His audience, both then and now.

We have a master of the house who does everything necessary to prepare a vineyard that will produce a good crop of grapes. He is going abroad so he hires tenant farmers to care for the vineyard, harvest the grapes at the proper time, and produce the wine. The men he chose agreed that they could keep a portion to live and survive on, but the bulk of the harvest belongs to the owner.

So, what is the first head-scratching moment in Jesus' parable? It's how these tenant farmers react when the owner sends his servants to collect what is rightfully his. Not only do they refuse to give over the agreed upon bounty of the harvest, but they attack, maim, and kill the servants who are sent as representatives of the owner. Even though the owner did the bulk of the work in building and planting, these tenants no longer consider him as worthy of anything. It's as if they have assumed rightful ownership and possession of property that actually belongs to someone else.

Now in Jesus parable, who is the master of the house, the Vineyard Owner? It is of course God Himself. And the tenant farmers are the religious leaders including the chief priests and Pharisees who are there listening to this story. And what is the vineyard? Their life and office as spiritual leaders given them by God. And what is the fruit? It is the spiritual worship, praise, and service to others they are called to produce and give to the God who has given them everything. They are to demonstrate a life of true worship, praise and service to set an example for the people God has given them to care for. But instead, they are keeping that worship and praise for themselves. They see themselves as being right with God by their perfect keeping of the law. And they are teaching these people to think and do the same. They want those people to look to them as being perfect and worthy of their honor and attention, instead of giving all glory to the owner of all things, who is God Himself.

The servants that are sent by the owner are the prophets sent by God to the people time and again throughout the history of His chosen people Israel. They were His voice to call the religious leaders back to worshiping God alone and to confess and believe that right standing with Him comes by faith alone, through the sacrificial system God had instituted. The religious leaders and the people were not perfect; they sinned. And therefore, what they earned for themselves was eternal suffering and death. But rather than them being placed upon the sacrificial altar, God commanded them to substitute animals in their place. Now because these were animals and not people, sacrificing them, was insufficient to forgive the people's sins and make them right with God. But these animals were like a placeholder for a greater and all-sufficient sacrifice that was to come. Except what these religious leaders practiced and taught was that their action and effort in providing the perfect animal for sacrifice is what won them favor with God and right standing with Him.

In the Parable the owner wants what is due to him. But how he goes about trying to get it is another head scratching moment. He keeps sending servants to these evil tenant farmers, reminding them of who they really are and what they owe to the Lord of the Vineyard. These servants were all the prophets the LORD sent to His chosen people throughout the history of Israel to call them back to faithful worship, and thereby give the LORD God what He was due: worship and praise, and loving service as the One true God, who forgave them their sins not by their works, but by His grace. And yet these prophetic voices were often silenced as the religious leaders tortured and killed them. And just like their ancestors before them, these religious leaders had the blood of the final Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, on their hands; all because he had the audacity to call them, those who saw themselves perfect in their law-keeping, to repent and turn to the gracious gift of God that was promised and is now here, the One He pointed to, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

What we see in this head-scratching move of the vineyard owner is patience and mercy directed at these evil tenant farmers. After they killed the first couple, he should've amassed an army and attacked them and destroyed them. But instead, he acts with a patience that is driven by his gracious and merciful heart, that desires not their death, but that they repent: that they turn from their evil ways, and their wrongful faith in themselves as the way to be right with God and turn back to Him.

## **The Son Who Came to Be Put to Death by the Tenant Farmers**

Nowhere is this patience and mercy illustrated better than in the sending of the son. It was initially for the original hearers a great head scratching moment. If these evil tenant farmers had no qualms about killing all his servants, why would the Lord of the Vineyard think it okay to send one so precious as his son? Jesus says he sent His son that they might respect him, meaning that they might come to their senses, and change, repent. The son came to draw their attention back to what they truly owed his father, the owner.

We know the son of the Lord of the Vineyard is the Son of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Vineyard owner, the Father, sent His only Son knowing what would happen, that He would suffer and die in horrible agony at the hands of those He came to save. But that was all part of the Father's plan. He loves all of His creation, even those evil tenant farmers that were the very religious leaders who were plotting to kill His Son. And Jesus loves them too. That is why He is there in Jerusalem telling this parable to them, to try to get them to see their sin, how they were withholding the glory and honor due God by their works righteousness and turn away from it. He told them this so that they might repent and believe in His testimony, that He is the promised Messiah, sent to be their Savior. And believing that, see and believe His one-time sacrifice pays all their debts of sin.

But many of them did not. Virtually none at that time did, that's why they had no qualms about orchestrating His condemnation and pushing Pilate for His death. And all who continued in that false faith in their own works and right standing would receive the very punishment they announced in answer to Jesus' question about what the Lord of the Vineyard would do to those evil tenant farmers. They said that those evil tenants would meet an evil end. They heard the parable, knew that they had a starring role in the story, yet refused to admit their sin and turn in repentance to believe in He who was the Son sent to save them. Those that died without faith in Christ in this world will suffer that evil end: eternal suffering and death that will begin on judgment day and stretch out forever.

## **What is This Parable Saying To You Here Today?**

Well, the all-important question of the hour is who are you and I in this parable? What is Jesus saying to us who live 2000 years after His telling of it?

First off you and I are not the tenant farmers. We are not those who gather confessing that we are right with God by our own works and actions. Quite the opposite, we are the people of God who confess we are saved by grace through faith in the Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We are members of His vineyard, His temple on earth today built without human hands, His Church. We are building blocks built in alignment with Christ as the cornerstone. We are called into our place in His vineyard by baptismal faith that professes Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the only thing that saves us. It is the only thing that makes us good enough to be members of His Church. And Christ's work enables us to be active members of His vineyard producing fruits that honor Him.

We are tenant farmers who are called to give the Vineyard Owner what is rightfully His for all that He has given us in this life: our life lived out in faith with Him now that stretches all the way to eternal life to come. And what does it look like for us to give Him what He deserves? It's getting up on Sunday morning and coming to Worship, even when we are tired, or even when we could be doing something else that we might want to do. It's taking time out during the week to study His Word, to pray to Him, and thus draw closer in our faith relationship with Him. It's sacrificing some of our time, talents, and treasures to do our part in the ministry of the Church, using the gifts and talents that He has given us to share His love and His Gospel Message with those who desperately need to hear it, so that they might not wind up in the same place as those unbelieving religious leaders. It's worship and praise and service given back to Him, not in order to win His favor or be saved, but as your way to give Him thanks for all the gracious gifts He has given you in your life now and for eternity.

## **Conclusion**

When I was on Vicarage in Chicago, I wound up in the hospital after contracting a Cellulitis infection in my leg. I had insurance, but being a Seminary Student, it wasn't the best coverage. I wound up with a sizable hospital bill that stretched into the thousands of dollars. It stuck with me throughout Vicarage and remained with me into my 4<sup>th</sup> year of Seminary, when on top of all the other bills for books, health insurance, and cost of living, I was unable to keep up with the payments. I felt terrible about owing that money. But the assistance I was receiving, as well as the money I earned on Vicarage, was needed to support the cost of my 4<sup>th</sup> year of Seminary, and there wasn't enough left to pay down this bill. I started to ignore and delete the emails and letters asking for payment. And then, all of a sudden, they just stopped. All of a sudden there were no more letters, emails, or phone calls asking for payment. At the time, finishing up my 4<sup>th</sup> year, I was just glad they stopped.

But after I graduated, I began to wonder what happened. And when I received my call and began my vocation here as Pastor, I knew I had the means and the responsibility to work on paying that bill again. I contacted the hospital in Chicago, with much trepidation, to see how much I still owed and resume payments, perhaps on some kind of payment plan. But I was genuinely surprised to find out that the bill had been taken care of, paid in full. When I asked by whom the hospital told me to contact the Lutheran Church where I had served as a Vicar. So, I did. The Pastor wouldn't tell me who had taken care of it, only that it was covered. I asked him what the final amount was. My plan was to send the Church payment checks and let him direct it to the appropriate place. Then the Pastor told me something that has stuck with me all this time. He said I should consider this a gift of grace, a gift from God. He said that God doesn't want me to pay it back, but instead pay it forward. He said I should give thanks and praise to God for this gift of hospital bill repayment, for the gift of my vocation as Pastor, and the greatest gift of all which is the salvation and eternal life I have in Christ, by faithfully serving in His kingdom, declaring His grace and forgiveness to the Church I have been called to serve by giving of my time, talents, and treasures to serve My Lord in His kingdom with all the gifts He has given me.

God's law demands we give worship and praise only to our Creator and Savior God. And God, from whom our sense of and desire for justice comes from, cannot just let this debt slide. But Jesus paid that debt for you and for me. He paid the debt we owe for all our sins. So that now, our fulfilling of God's command to worship and praise Him is done not out of fear of punishment, but out of a heart filled with love and gratitude. May all of us here today see and confess Jesus Christ as the giver of all good things in our lives. May we be moved by the Spirit to give Him thanks and praise that is worthy of who He is through the giving of our time, talents, and treasures in worship and service in His vineyard, the Church. And when we fall short of honoring Him as we should, may we know and believe His grace and mercy covers all our shortcomings and sins, and that we are restored by repentant faith that sees our sins, confesses them, and believes in His wonderful words of forgiveness. In that faith may we remain useful workers in His vineyard, His Church, His reign and rule, now and forever. Amen.